

Forgive Us as We Forgive Them

When my death us do part
Then shall forgiven and forgiving meet again,
Or will it be, as always, too late?

~Louise Penny

At 8 a.m. before the first class of the schooling horse show and the only in-hand class of the day, I stood facing inexperienced riders, my judge's clipboard in hand, the wind whipping dust in my eyes.

A class in showmanship focuses on details: the horses must be groomed to a glistening sheen; the handlers polished; they should pivot around as the judge passes the horse's tail; saddles gleam; specific placement of the hands on the lead rope is scrutinized.

I reminded the girls to present in the ring with heads up, eyes looking forward. "Plaster a smile on your face." I praised and spoke to each girl in the field, gave advice on how to improve and addressed the group with my smile and an upward hand wave before they exited.

Nevertheless, of the ten girls, not a one had a flawless inspection, not a one had a perfect score. Each was graced with a tiny moment of brilliance. Yet each had hesitated into a moment of error.

Perhaps I also should have told them that before the show, when I was competing, I reviewed the elements taught in the in-hand class, just to be sure. Perhaps I shouldn't have told them I stopped showing because I threw up before each class, but my confession relaxed them and set the tone for the rest of the day. I understood their need to perform, to excel, to practice their skills, to control and corral their anxieties, and to hook satin ribbons over the rolled-down windows of their parent's cars.

When I was their age, I wanted to be Annie Oakley; hoped to be a Dale Evans to a Roy Rogers.

Except for the pollen-laden winds flapping my score sheets, even though I attached them with rubber bands, I hadn't sensed trouble when I entered the show ring for the schooling show. I pressed my Charlie One Horse hat tighter to my head; it looked good, cooler than a Stetson, but because of the fashionable potato chip curl of the brim, even in a slight breeze it tended to become air-born. If we'd been out West, sage brush would have tumbled across the field into the arena; my hat would have followed.

Horses spook at odd sounds and unnatural motions.

But in Delaware, almost twenty miles from the bay and ocean, only a lone tissue skittered into the ring. I was looking away, shielding myself from the wind, watching the spectators set up chairs, unfold blankets, and wait for the hot dog cart, when a man separated from the crowd.

"Hey." He loomed over the open-wired fence, pressing against the post.

His mouth wide, his voice loud, his words piercing more fiercely than the wind. "I don't get you, . . . you —" I saw his mouth shape the word; I heard the word bitch. "My daughter shouda had a first. What were *you* looking at?"

I saw his nostrils, almost smelled him. Stale with crusted sweat, like a horse rode hard and put up wet.

I spoke quietly, more from shock than courtesy: "I should not discuss a specific score with you."

I wanted to say, "Jump back, Jack."

"There are girls who've been riding longer. Y'shouda placed 'em higher." As if he were their champion, the knight on a white horse. He clenched his fist near my eyes, then opened his hand and jabbed his finger as if to stab my chest.

A judge is the person appointed to determine the outcome of a contest. A synonym is umpire. I'd watched enough professional baseball games to know, even in the face of testosterone-induced shouting, the ump's word is final. Too much posturing and you're out of the game. Too bad I couldn't oust that man. Not then, not now.

I heard horses behind me, nickering in the barn, anxious to enter the arena for the next class. Everyone waited, impatiently.

I placated. “On any given day...”

Really, I wanted to take a horse crop and snap him on the nose. I had a momentary image of the rowels on my spurs rolling over his soft, private tissues but I reined in my feelings.

He knew he intimidated; he liked that he intimidated. My throat threatened to close with emotions I had not yet processed.

Still, I sassed him. “You know so much, next year why don’t *you* judge?” I hoped he heard the snootiness in my tone, a hint of sarcasm in my offer, and the dismissiveness. I hoped he did not hear the high pitch of my voice, the sound of my heart beating hard, echoing in my ears.

He did not leave, and I might have looked around for help before he finally said, “You’re so typical, just so typical.” How many times I’ve wished I’d said something before he stomped away.

At first glance, nothing awful happened that morning: perhaps many women begin their days with a slight injury, an insulting remark. Watching his back disappear into the crowd, I imagined what could have happened, what that man might have done, what he *had* done to his family, his daughter, his wife. He must have had practice. Maybe, like the students in the schooling show, he was honing his skills – not with the horses, but with me.

The next class entered the ring.

By mid-morning, the wind calmed; by mid-afternoon classes concluded; and by late-afternoon, my sun bronzed cheeks gave me a healthy glow. By all measures, that day was a success.

Most of life consists of “no big deals.” Certainly, and really, he *was* no big deal. So why do I feel I gave away something that day? That I lost something that day? That something was taken from me?

I’ve thought about that interaction on and off for the past five years, usually when I see women looking at men in a submissive way as if to ask: Is it okay? May I speak now?

You’ve seen that looks too.

Or when I break a glass, or drop a cup. “Oh, you clumsy thing,” I say. When I forget an important date: “How can you be so scatter-brained?”

The memory begins with a lump in my throat, the way Robert Frost describes the beginning of his poetic creations. I pick at that unhealed sore until it weeps. Inevitable drops of sweat meander through my scalp. I hadn't stepped back, but I hadn't stepped up either.

Memories are deep emotions held close. Perhaps waiting to be explored; perhaps hoping to remain unexamined. I see his slick, thin lips – more a maw than a mouth. He was clean-shaven, with brown hair, and his blue shirt had a collar, I think. His eyes seemed close together. If I passed him on the street, I wouldn't recognize him, wouldn't give him a second glance. He wasn't remarkable. He might have been anyone.

I could have asked the barn manager for his name and address. She would have had it on file; was I going to stalk him? Report him? He didn't matter as a real person; if he had, I would have remembered more.

I remember only my feelings, the emotional onslaught that clings like a sticky spider's web. Then I sit on the nearest chair or lean back on the seat in my car, and wait for the physical sensations to pass: dry mouth, flaming cheeks, the slight turn of my belly.

Once, while I was mucking my horse stalls a thought arose unbidden. He probably mistreats horses too. I leaned against the wall until the flush of heat on my face cooled. He had to have started somewhere.

I am bothered. More than bothered. I am repulsed by the memory of that day. Maybe I was too confident, too arrogant, or too intimidated to have the last word? Perhaps I hadn't done my job well. It was my duty to maintain civility. Women are supposed to be the gentler sex.

With each visit to that interaction, I imagine my responses. "Let me explain," I say and he nods his head. He agrees with me because I have said the exactly perfect phrase, but the memory is *couda, shouda, woulda*. Like the young girls of the in-hand class at the schooling show, I hesitated into a moment of error, and it cost me.

What keeps me coming back?

Only recently have I begun to understand that by accepting responsibility and blame for his behavior, I give him power. And I do it again, and again. I should roll up that memory, lock it

away, and concentrate on goodness, and pleasures, and kindness. I should relive memories that balance loss, and terror, and grief.

I retch when I realize that my reaction to him and to myself on that day and since, is the same as that offered by an abused woman. Again, and again. A desire to make it right, to try to move forward, to smooth, to hope things get better, to believe in control in their lives and meaning in his.

I recently read an article that said on average, it takes thirty-seven instances of abuse before a woman admits to herself that there is a problem, and even then, she might insist she is the cause. The article contained other grim statistics: It takes about six unsuccessful attempts for a woman to finally break away from the relationship. And this is with support. Eighty-five percent of women who leave, return to the abusive relationship.

And I had been doing exactly that by rehashing that moment; by allowing that memory to become more powerful, more disabling, to crush my sense of self.

My friends said, let it go. But I did not. I had re-imagined the episode almost obsessively. Finally, a friend said. "You know how much power you are giving him, don't you? I don't like that. Stop that. Leave it be."

Look up domestic violence. The stories are staggering. The statistics unrelenting.

About one third of all women will experience domestic abuse and about thirty percent of murdered women are the result of intimate partner abuse. Seventy-five percent of murders by an abusive partner occur when the woman tries to leave.

Before that day, if you had asked, I would have said I was outspoken with a Jersey girl attitude, an independent and clever woman, and so smart I could spot an abusive partner; that I never would have allowed myself to court that type of relationship.

I took credit for my strength, my acute discernment, and if pushed, I might have admitted I believed women who stayed were weak, hapless, and vastly different from me.

I would not have admitted I am all of that . . . I am not different.

Before I lived in that blind-sided moment, I was blind.